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Reading between the lines

Bob Hillman

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Now in its third year, the current English course requires students to study two texts closely from a list of 20 published each year by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, under the area of study entitled "reading and responding". Each text is chosen by an expert panel that judges its suitability as well as its literary and thematic merits. There is a range of text types offered, including novels, short stories, dramas, films, poetry and non-fiction.

An individual text generally remains on the list a minimum of three years and beyond that depending on its popularity. This year, nine new texts appear on the list, while four of the most popular (*Look Both Ways*, *A Man for All Seasons*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Maestro*) remain for at least another year.

In addition to the number and types of text, there are other requirements for the study of text, including at least one set in Australia or composed by an Australian and a limit of one film. (Note that these requirements include the two additional texts that are selected for the area of study "creating and presenting".)

New texts that satisfy the Australian selection include *Cosi* by Australian playwright Louis Nowra; poetry by Judith Wright; a non-fiction adventure by Michael McGirr, *Bypass: the story of a road*; and *Year of Wonders*, a novel set in England in 1666 by Australian writer Geraldine Brooks. Other new texts include the film *On the Waterfront* starring Marlon Brando; a non-fiction exploration of the Vietnam War in *Dear America - Letters Home from Vietnam*; Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*; short stories by Lahiri Jhumpa that explores how Indians live overseas; and the interesting *Life of Pi* by Yann Martell.

There are three formal occasions where students will be assessed on the selected texts. The first is in unit-3 and it may take the form of an oral presentation or a written response. The class teacher will determine this but a quick poll of schools would suggest that most classes complete a written piece for this outcome.

The second occasion will occur in unit-4. However, the outcome for the second text must be in the written form and is worth 50 per cent of the assessment for that unit. Finally students will choose one of the texts they have studied to write on in the October English examination; they will have a choice of two topics on each text.

The best way to ensure both success and satisfaction is by engaging with the text and enjoying the challenge

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of exploring the messages and ideas the author or director presents. This can only be achieved by a close study of the text and by taking the opportunity of multiple readings or viewings.

The initial reading is generally a way of understanding the plot and characters, while getting some preliminary insights into the key values and themes being offered by the author or director. It is really in the subsequent readings that students can truly come to appreciate the detail and art of the text. The fact is some authors spend months - if not years - crafting their stories, selecting the exact word or phrase, considering where to set a particular scene, and developing their themes and ideas throughout the course of the text, not to mention the symbolism that is embedded in most literature.

For thoughtful readers there is much to be gained by taking the time to contemplate, ponder and deliberate as they peruse a text again and again.

It is not surprising then that most successful students will have read or viewed their texts half a dozen times by the end of the year. Each new reading of a passage, chapter or scene increases familiarity, which can breed new insights. It should be considered that no scene or chapter is included in a text without some purpose. Likewise, in a play where economy is at a premium, each speech, each line, each word is carefully selected. Take, for example, Sir Thomas More's apparently insignificant line when his family visits him in jail. His son-in-law, Roper, remarks that the prison is "an awful place".

But More retorts: "Except it's keeping me from you, my dears, it's not so bad. Remarkably like any other place." At face value he is attempting to assuage his family's concern for him but on a deeper level it is demonstrating that part of More that is most significant; his spiritual self. His metaphysical situation is far less important than the capacity to communicate with God. This single line reinforces that for More the spiritual self is all important.

Each line has a purpose in offering the reader or viewer information and insights, challenging us, exciting us and inspiring us, if we allow ourselves to become engaged and involved in the text we study.

While a close analysis of the words and images that make up a text is invaluable, as perceptive readers we must also step away from the text itself and examine how it has been constructed in order to add value and meaning to our reading.

Consider the fact that no fewer than eight of the texts on the current list are told through the eyes of a narrator. The non-fiction texts *Into Thin Air* and *Bypass: the story of a road*, are both journeys taken by the respective authors and on that journey we learn much about our fellow man, but also we learn a great deal about the person relating such journeys.

In the novels *Maestro*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *Life of Pi* male protagonists reveal intricate details about themselves and their stories. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell uses a type of third-person narration, so that we as readers can get insights into the world of Oceania under the cruel totalitarian regime of Ingsoc and the way in which it affects individuals on all levels. At the same time, however, Winston Smith is victim of the mind-altering propaganda. If it were a traditional narration, told only by Winston, we could never understand the brutality and manipulation that occurs within the Ministry of Truth.

Year of Wonders, on the other hand, is set in a small English village when it is struck by the plague. By offering the story as a narrative, Geraldine Brooks gives readers a deep understanding of the world in which Anna Frith lives. But as analytical readers we must challenge - or at least comprehend that we as readers are being influenced in a very particular way.

To gain the most out of the text we must ask ourselves pertinent questions about the narrator. What are the social values that she has acquired from the world in which she has grown up? What are the personal

attributes and qualities she possesses that may colour her perspective of others and the world? What experiences and relationships affect her sense of the world and what is occurring in her village? And how reliable then, is her narration? To what degree can we "trust" her to offer an "accurate" view of the events of 1666? Invariably, essay topics will call on students to make these assessments and interpretations.

VCE English is a lively and interesting course and much independent preparation, thinking and consideration is required for success. Our study of text challenges the way we think and what we believe. But ultimately it helps students learn to read deeply for the rest of their lives and to take real enjoyment from the challenge of a quality text.

Bob Hillman is a senior English teacher at Trinity Grammar School in Kew

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